

## THE PROBLEMS OF CITY LIFE

### Crowds, Traffic, and Muggers

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Juvenal, *Satires* 3.232-248, 254-261, 268-314

Here in Rome many sick people die from lack of sleep. Noise deprives them of sleep, and they develop indigestion and burning ulcers which in turn produce illness. But what rented rooms ever allow sleep? In this city, sleep comes only to the wealthy.<sup>42</sup> This is the source of the disease: carts creaking through the narrow and winding streets<sup>43</sup> and the curses of drivers caught in traffic jams will rob even a deaf man of sleep.

If social duty calls,<sup>44</sup> the rich man will be carried above the heads of the crowd by his tall Ligurian litter bearers. As people give way he will be swiftly transported to his destination, and, inside the litter, he will read or write or sleep, for a litter with the windows closed induces sleep. Without any personal strain, he will arrive before us. Whereas we, although we hurry, are blocked by a wave of people in front of us. And the great crowd behind crushes us. One man hits me with his elbow, another with a hard pole; one man strikes me on the head with a wood beam, another with a wine jar. My legs are covered with thick mud. Then, on all sides, big feet step on me, and a nail from a soldier's boot pierces my toe. . . .

One wagon carries fir-wood timber, another carries pine.<sup>45</sup> They are piled high and they sway, posing for the crowd a threat of danger. For if a wagon carrying marble should tip over and dump its load of mountain rock on top of the throng of people, what would remain of the bodies? Who would find the limbs or the bones? The crushed body would utterly disappear, like the soul. . . .

Now consider the various and diverse dangers at night: how high it is to the lofty roofs (from which roof tiles fall and hit you on the head), how often cracked and broken pots fall from windows, with what weight they mark and damage the pavement when they strike it. You could be considered thoughtless and careless about sudden accidents if you were to go out for dinner without first making a will. For indeed there are as many potential disasters as there are open windows where you are passing by at night. You should therefore pray and carry with you this pitiable wish: that people may be content to empty over you, from their windows, only an open basin.<sup>46</sup>

The violent drunk who has had the misfortune to mug no one feels unsatisfied; he tosses and turns, unable to sleep. For some men, a good mugging induces sleep. Yet, though young and heated with wine, he avoids the man whom a scarlet cloak, a very long line of attendants, and many torches and oil lamps warn should be avoided. Me, however, whom the moon usually escorts or, at best, the thin light of a candle whose wick I carefully nurture—me he fears not. Now imagine the preliminaries to this street fight, if indeed you can call it a fight when he does the beating and I am only beaten. He stands in front of me and orders me to halt. You have to obey. What else can you do when a maniac, and one stronger than you, coerces you? "Where are you coming from?" he shouts. "At whose house did you have your dinner of vinegar and beans?"<sup>47</sup> What shoemaker shared with you his

<sup>42</sup>The wealthy could afford the relative privacy of a large home such as that described by Vitruvius in selection 79. Or, like Pliny and Cicero, they could escape to the peace and quiet of country villas (selections 18 and 98).

<sup>43</sup>No vehicles (except litters carried by slaves) were allowed to pass through the streets of Rome during daylight hours. This regulation was first put into effect by Julius Caesar.

<sup>44</sup>social duty: see selections 11-14 and 186.

<sup>45</sup>Vehicles carrying building materials for public buildings were allowed in the city during daylight hours, an exception to the rule cited in footnote 43.

<sup>46</sup>open basin: i.e., a basin of dirty water or food slops, not a chamberpot. (See selection 89).

<sup>47</sup>The foods mentioned—beans, leeks, and sheep lips, and vinegar to drink—suggest the dinner of a poor lower-class person; see the introduction to Chapter V.

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leeks and lips of a boiled sheep? You won't answer? Speak or I'll kick you. Tell me where you hang out. In what Jews' prayer-house can I find you?"<sup>48</sup> Whether you try to speak, or shrink back in silence, it's all the same. In either case they mug you, and then in a violent rage make you pay for permission to escape. This is the poor man's freedom: having been mugged and battered with fists, he begs and entreats his assailant to allow him to go away with a few teeth left. Yet these things are not all you have to fear. For there is always someone who will rob you even when your house is securely bolted and after all the shops everywhere are locked and quiet with their shutters closed. Sometimes the burglars even carry weapons! And whenever armed police are sent to the Pomptine marsh and Gallinarian forest<sup>49</sup> to secure the area, all the thieves and criminals run from there to Rome, as if to a game preserve. What forge, what anvil is not now producing heavy chains? So much iron is used to make chains that we may well fear that there will not be enough for plows and that there will be a shortage of mattocks and hoes. Happy were our ancestors. Happy were those generations long ago who lived under kings and tribunes and saw Rome content with one jail.

## Noise

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Martial, *Epigrams* 12.57.1-14, 18-21, 24-28

Do you want to know why I often seek refuge in my small fields and squalid villa at arid Nomentum?<sup>50</sup> Because, Sparsus, there is no place in the city where a poor man may have a quiet moment for thought. In the morning schoolteachers won't let you live,<sup>51</sup> before dawn bakers disturb you; and the whole day the hammers of coppersmiths jar your nerves. Over here the moneychanger idly jangles Neronian coins on his filthy table; over there a man hammering Spanish gold dust pounds his well-worn stone with a shiny mallet. The frenzied band of Bellona's priests<sup>52</sup> never stops chanting; nor does the sailor, who survived a shipwreck but lost a limb, ever cease his begging; and the Jew, taught by his mother to panhandle, and the half-blind huckster of sulphur products continually solicit money from passers-by. . . . You, Sparsus, know nothing of these things, nor can you ever know, you who enjoy the luxury of a mansion, you whose home looks down on the hilltops, you who own a country estate right here in Rome. . . . You enjoy deep sleep and a stillness disturbed by no voices; the daylight never shines in unless you let it.<sup>53</sup> But I am awakened by the laughter of the passing crowd, and all of Rome, it seems, stands near by bed. So, whenever I am weary of these torments and wish to sleep, I go to my villa.

## Theft

This message was painted on a wall in Pompeii.

<sup>48</sup> Juvenal despised, in general, all foreigners, but particularly those from the eastern Mediterranean areas; see selection 235.

<sup>49</sup> The Pomptine marsh was in the south of Latium. The Gallinarian forest was in Campania, near Cumae.

<sup>50</sup> *Nomentum*: a town in Latium, northeast of Rome. Martial was, of course, fortunate to have a country villa, however small, to which he could retreat. The poor had no such opportunities to escape the noise of Rome.

<sup>51</sup> Classes began at dawn and were frequently held outdoors. The voices of the schoolteachers might therefore disturb people living near the school. See selection 139.

<sup>52</sup> Bellona: the Roman goddess of war; her priests were called "frenzied" because they gashed their arms with knives during sacrifices to her.

<sup>53</sup> Compare the comments of Juvenal in the previous passage: "In this city, sleep comes only to the wealthy."